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Epilogue: Reflections on Belonging, Otherness and the Possibilities of Friendship

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In migration and refugee studies, belonging has long been equated with the territorial space of the country of origin as home. Malkki (1995) links this so-called sedentarist bias to the claim that we live in an era of 'the national order of things' in which 'rootedness' in culture and a geographic territory is considered to be the natural and normal feature of humanity. In her pioneering work, she disputes this territorial approach of home in refugee studies by deterritorializing it.

> But if "home" is where one feels most safe and at ease, instead of some essentialized point on the map, then it is far from clear that returning where one fled from is the same thing as "going home." (Malkki, 1995, p. 509)

To automatically consider the country of origin as 'home' also assumes 'that refugees' attachment to their homeland and their desire to return to it are 'natural' givens' (Al-Rasheed, 1994, p. 199). In Al-Rasheed's research on two refugee groups in England (Iraqi Assyrians and Iraqi Arabs), she shows how their past experiences and their relationships with their country of origin are essential to the way the concepts of home and return are understood. She comments on the predominance of the myth of return among the Iraqi Arabs and its absence among the Assyrian ethnoreligious minority from Iraq (Al-Rasheed, 1994, p. 217). This comparison shows that belonging and home do not have the same meaning to all people from the same country of origin. Thus, the position in terms of belonging of individuals or groups who have experienced othering (because of their gender, age, ethnicity, race or sexuality) in their country of birth is

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much more complicated than is often assumed. To grasp this complexity we need a non-sedentarist approach that enables a broader lens for viewing different sources and locations of belonging (see also Ghorashi, 2017). From a nonsedentary point of view, belonging is deterritorialized and reterritorialized through the particular positionings by which different practices, spaces and biographical stories overlap. Belonging is about the embodied, imagined and narrated ways that 'processes of place making meet the changing global economic and political conditions of lived spaces – the relation, we could say, between place and space' (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, pp. 39–40).

As also shown in this volume, the approach of belonging embraces a diversity of experiences and feelings, but because it is situated and contextual, it is also multilayered and dynamic. Belonging is then a domain where the biographies of the past and the present are mediated through present choices, opportunities and networks. One experiences belonging 'when one inhabits a cognitive environment in which one can undertake the routines of daily life and through which one finds one's identity best mediated' (Rapport & Dawson, 1998, p. 10). Taking the intersections of global and local conditions into consideration and keeping a multilayered, deterritorialized and fluid approach to belonging in mind, we will make a case for friendship as an innovative perspective in the context of contemporary practices of othering in the West (see also Ghorashi, 2017).

Belonging and Otherness

Recent studies on Islam and Muslims in the West show the increasing exclusion of this diaspora group from the national imagination on the basis of perceived cultural and religious differences. This is true despite decades of active multicultural policies in many countries in and beyond Europe (Mansouri & Marotta, 2010; Moghissi & Ghorashi, 2010; Smets, 2017). Since the early 2000s, there has been an undeniable escalation of the negative othering discourse concerning the Muslim diaspora (e.g. Galloway, Hoepel, & Smets, 2016; Verkuyten & Zaremba, 2005). Yet the othering discourse on migrants is not new and has been present in the West for decades. Prasad and Prasad (2002) argue that the contemporary discourse of othering is informed by 'the social and cultural construction of a fundamental *ontological* distinction between "the west" and "the non-west"' (p. 61). The ways that migrants of colour are approached in the present, the authors argue, can be traced to the legacy of colonialism.

Within the constructed binaries of difference, the ethnic other is not only considered as absolutely different but as inferior to the norm of the ethnic Western self.

However, there are two significant differences in the present dominant discourses of othering compared to the decades preceding the turn of the century. The first difference is the blatant manner in which negative sentiments towards migrants of colour as ethnic or racialized others prevail in the public and political space of many Western countries. If the dominant discourses of most Western countries in previous decades was one of toleration of one form or another (i.e. assimilation in France, integration in Britain and multiculturalism in the Netherlands), the tone of the current public debates is openly aggressive. Parekh (2008, p. 11) even refers to an extensive moral panic. Blatant negativity in the discourse, underscored by an explicit nationalistic foundation, is the first distinctive element of the present discourse of othering. The second difference is the prominence of Islam as an essential component. In many countries, the unwanted other is directly associated with Muslim migrants and their children. Attacking Islam in the public space is not limited to statements from politicians who openly refer to 'Islam as a backward culture' or 'dangerous ideology' (respectively made by Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders, both antimigrant Dutch politicians). The European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia identified a rise in the number of 'physical and verbal threats being made, particularly to those visually identifiable as Muslims, in particular women wearing the hijab' (C. Allen & Nielsen, 2002, p. 16). In the case of men, Ewing (2008) argues that:

> stigmatization of Muslim masculinity is a form of abjection, in which the Muslim men's sense of self and honor are represented in European national discourses as an uninhabitable way of being, for instance, a German or a Frenchman or a Norwegian. (p. 3)

The Power of Normalization

Despite the visibility of many othering practices in Europe and beyond, the immense power of these practices lies in their normalizing capacity, their invisibility, in how they become part of the taken-for-granted practice of everyday life. In late modern societies power is more present in invisible normalization than in visible forms of domination

(Bauman, 2000). The normalizing power of othering is present in the prominence of hegemonic norms comprising gender, racial and cultural hierarchies of difference that reproduce structures of inequality in everyday practices (Young, 2007). The fundamental ingredient in the most visible othering practices related to Muslim migrants is the construction of otherness through culture and religion. The culture and religion of migrants is imagined as absolutely different and inferior to the culture of the native born. This 'culturalist discourse of othering' is based on a homogeneous, static, coherent and rooted notion of culture combined with a rooted assumption of belonging (see also Stolcke, 1995). Ghorashi (2006) has referred to this essentialist foundation of cultural othering as it relates to women's emancipation as the 'culturalization of emancipation'. Duyvendak (2011) uses the 'culturalization of citizenship' to refer to the same process of cultural essentialism. Anthias (2013, p. 2) argues that this 'culturalization of social relations' leads to the reification of difference as dangerous and blinds us to other broader sources of exclusion. In addition to this, Ghorashi (2006) argues that the constructed dichotomy of difference blinds us towards possible sources of connection. To unsettle this 'culturalist discourse of othering', we need to envision practices that can denormalize the taken-for-granted taxonomies of the Self and the Other at their core and create conditions for connection. An important way of connecting and becoming engaged is through friendship.

Belonging Through Friendship

In the era of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000), the traditional ties (to a given community) are being displaced by differentiated sources of affective amplifications, requiring a suspension of judgment about the authenticity level of these affections (Amin, 2012). Inspired by Aristotle's fantasy of timocracy, or a city of brothers, friendship has been considered an important grammar for public engagement (D. Allen, 2004). But how to imagine friendship and connectedness when the other is considered as a 'potential enemy' who lives inside the nation without entirely belonging to it?

In contemporary Western societies where the other is categorized as 'unusual', 'strange', 'untrustworthy', 'unwanted' and 'abnormal', friendship could become a powerful means to unsettle the dichotomous and normalized practice of othering. By presenting some personal anecdotes, we want to show how friendship can unsettle practices of othering and serve as a source of connection.

Halleh:

> Once I was in the sauna with a friend of mine and a guy who is also a regular visitor to the sauna asked us: "May I ask you a personal question? Are you twins?" We both had to laugh because we often hear that we look like each other, but no one had ever asked us if we were twins before. Then I said: "We are not twins. I am an Iranian Muslim and my friend is an American Jew." What happened after that was a profound form of silence, probably a sign of great shock. The guy did not talk the rest of the time in the sauna and seemed to have gone into deep thought.

Kathy:

> For years I have been going to a Bosnian woman in Amsterdam for my bimonthly pedicure. In the midst of all the clipping, filing, and polishing, we have had endless conversations about work, health, family, and our experiences of living as relative "newcomers" in the Netherlands (I am originally from the US). When I gave a party to celebrate my book, I invited her. At the party one of my Dutch friends kept asking her, with irritating insistence, where she was from and how we knew each other. We looked at each other, smiling knowingly, and she said: "We're friends."

As Halleh's story illustrates, presenting a close friendship with 'a potential enemy' in a rather exaggerated manner by keeping the nuances out of the presentation (Halleh was born a Muslim yet is not practicing it and her friend is a Jew who is married to an Iranian man) is a way to denormalize the essentialist foundation of assumptions of difference that are taken for granted. Similarly Kathy's story shows that bridging differences is possible through 'friendship'. In both cases an 'unusual friendship' is used as a strategy to stimulate the imagining of connections beyond expected assumptions. Assertions of friendship can nip the everyday policing of the borders of national identity in the bud.

These examples are one way of presenting a story of 'a strange connection' and making it normal. In this way, a presumed contested form of connection can become a new imagined possibility for belonging. This strategy is inspired by the discussion of *drag* in Judith Butler's (2006) work. In relation to categories of gender, Judith Butler argues that gender

is reified through the act of repetition. 'This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation' (p. 191). For Butler, the example of drag unsettles this normalized and fixed presented reality of gender norms. Drag, in this way, resists the violence performed by the normalized gender 'reality' of difference (Butler, 2006). In that vein, we argue that the 'unusual' or 'odd' examples of friendship stated above have the same capacity to break the persistence of cultural boundaries of difference through repetition and imagine new belongings.

Creating Spaces of Commonality

In addition to the strategic use of friendship, durable connections leading to long-term friendships as sources of belonging could become possible through the creation of 'space for commonality' (Hage, 2014). A space of commonality offers the chance for establishing friendship relations. For communality, people do not need to be similar; rather they need to create possibilities for connection through heterogeneity. In other words, people can find common ground based on the specific issues they agree on and (temporarily) neglect the issues on which they disagree. In this context, narratives can be shared and valued in a way that leads to the creation of commonality, which in turn increases mutual involvement (e.g. Fishkin & Luskin, 2005; Fung & Wright, 2001). Commonality can be found in daily affairs against the background of cultural misunderstandings, as illustrated below.

> Peer: As a researcher I spend a lot of time with members of a local community in Amsterdam East, consisting of individuals of different ethnic backgrounds. There were complaints between new and established residents, with each blaming the other for being rude and not interacting when using the staircase. When the issue became the subject of discussion, it appeared that the underlying problem was that some residents held different views on who should introduce themselves to the other; i.e., should the newcomers or the established residents take the initiative to introduce themselves. This resulted in no introductions and a blaming of the other. It was only after the issue had been discussed that people began to understand what had been

> happening and found a way to resolve the problem, to everyone's great relief, including my own. Sharing narratives can therefore help residents to cope with potential cultural misunderstandings.

Hage's (2014) 'space for commonality' resembles the delayed interspace (Ghorashi, 2014) that enables engagement and sociability beyond encounter and conviviality (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2016). The speed of living that is a hallmark of the late modern era leads to impatience. Impatience is not a virtue in a time that requires both patience and composure to grasp the surrounding complexity as fully as possible. In this vein, it is particularly important to include delay, a kind of timeout, enabling space for connections from the position of difference. The act of delay protects us from what Eriksen (2001) refers to as 'the tyranny of the moment'. 'To go fast means also to forget fast', as Lyotard argues (in Janssens & Steyaert, 2001, p. 109). Because of the hastiness of our actions, we tend to forget details and exclude the multiplicity around us. Delayed interspaces help us to include *difference* yet also go beyond dichotomies of difference (Ghorashi & Ponzoni, 2014; Ghorashi & Sabelis, 2013). In this volume we have seen examples of how delay has been used to bridge differences (Leyerzapf, Abma, Verdonk, & Ghorashi, 2018; Vlind & Smets, 2018). The main challenge here is to rethink the normalized notion of otherness, which is reified as opposite of the self or as a failure of sameness, thinking of it instead as a dynamic and multiple state of becoming. Becoming, according to Deleuze and Guattari, 'is not a change between two states (contraptions) from a point of departure to a point of arrival, one is in the middle, experimenting without destination' (in Janssens & Steyaert, 2001, p. 12). It requires one to step back (becoming modest or anonymous) and to step aside (creating spaces empty of judgment).

Stepping back means that we choose to distance ourselves from the hierarchical orders (fixed categories of self and other) that are informed by normalizing power. Taking this as a starting point means that we need to engage in an ongoing balancing act with the self and the other in a manner in which the dynamic connection between the two does not depart a priori from a hierarchical relation. The often used concept of *contiguity* in feminist literature grasps this process by implying the conscious and continuous use of a nonhierarchical view on difference, 'difference side by side, without sameness as the norm or the anchor by which difference is constituted' (Oseen, 1997, p. 55).

Stepping aside (Janssens & Steyaert, 2001) means creating temporary interspaces that are empty of judgment. The Dutch philosopher Theo de

Boer refers to this step as *epochè*, a temporary suspension of the truth of one's own judgment. This implies decentering the subject's position and creating space for alterity. It provides an alternative to othering by approaching the other from the position of the other. Since there is no end in that process, once the space is emptied from the dictatorship of the self, the self–other dichotomy becomes blurred, leading to interaction through the continuous balancing act of sameness and difference.

The assumption here is that a dual process of distancing from 'the centre' (stepping back) and distancing from 'the self' (stepping aside) could create novel ways of and space for relating to the other. By giving away one's position, one, at the same time, 'gives way' (Janssens & Steyaert, 2001, p. 106). There is no need to protect or defend one's space. Continually 'giving a/way' creates a movement which prevents people from becoming 'tied' into positions of power (Serres, in Janssens & Steyaert, 2001, p. 106). Continually stepping aside is like dancing: and dance becomes the metaphor not only for giving way, but also for creating a new meeting ground. As Davis (2015) writes in her study of the connections that emerge in the global dance culture of tango, tango is 'an encounter across many different borders between dancers with a shared desire for difference'. Such encounters unsettle old hierarchies of power and engender new imaginings of belonging (see also Ghorashi & Wels, 2009).

The giving and taking such as takes place during dancing – and possibly also through other creative expressions – may provide a step forward to a more inclusive society where connections and diversity can go together. Surowiecki (2005) shows how diversity offers opportunities to use different perspectives and views that tend to be lacking in homogenous groups. It appears that a large group characterized by diversity can make better and more grounded predictions and find more intelligent options for solving problems (pp. 29–32).

Conclusion

Every choice we make as individuals 'always implicate[s] the positions from which we speak or write – the positions of enunciation' (Hall, 1990, p. 222). These positions are located in particular discourses that are time- and space-specific. The power of discourse lies particularly in its tacit impact on positioning through disciplining and normalizing the actions and interactions of individuals, which are often taken for granted. Strategic use of 'unusual' friendships and engagements within alternative interspaces, as presented in this chapter, provides alternatives for unsettling the

fixed and normalized practices in the daily interactions of individuals. By doing so new spaces of connection and belonging can begin to emerge. When the power of exclusion works through repetition and is manifested in the daily normalization of our actions, acts of belonging are needed to provide an alternative in the same fluid manner. This means thinking about these acts in terms of small but chained actions (Medina, 2013) that are taken up by individuals, groups, communities, academia and so on, in their daily reflective actions. Medina (2013) argues that all individuals 'have (typically plenty of) particular things to do in the work towards justice' or towards a more connected society. By repeatedly presenting 'unusual stories of friendship' and practicing 'unconventional public engagements' in a variety of locations and spaces, the subtle and taken-for-granted power of normalization of othering can be subverted. In this way, acts of friendship (read: acts of belonging) are manifested in partial and temporal movements that break away from the subtle workings of power rather than in a grand movement against oppressive power that leads to a utopic society (Zanoni & Janssens, 2007). Repetition of small unsettling choices and demonstrations comes close to what Judith Butler suggested as a 'strategy of subversive repetition'. This, what we call *unsettling politics of belonging* through unconventional engagement, is a powerful way to subvert the subtle and ungraspable power of normalization.

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